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Hobbymaniac, Wired for Sound, That's the Fervid Radio 'Ham'

By DON C. TRENARY
Of The Journal Staff

Along about now—or along about any time, for that matter—some Milwaukeean is sitting comfortably in his own home having a chat with a pal in Chihuahua, Saskatchewan, Oahu, Ugandi or East Overshoe.

The gossiper is a member of the world-wide fraternity of radio "hams," a jovial gang of hobby maniacs who, with an assist from science, have reduced the globe to the dimension of a telegraph key or microphone button.

Every hour of the day, perhaps every minute, the call "CQ" goes out over one of the radio bands reserved for amateur use. "CQ" is the mating call of the "hams," it means that some amateur has his jawbone set and wants someone to chew the rag with.

Responses to the call are many and various.

Douglas Pavek, 4669 N. 18th st., sent it out on his rig while his wife sat by, listening and knitting a sweater. He raised a trader in Basutoland, deep in the interior of South Africa. There was nothing unusual in the distance—but the trader's wife was sitting by and knitting a sweater, too.

Today Is Tomorrow

Charles Kaetel, 3145-A N. 48th st., has a "ham" set in his car. He sent out a "CQ" one time while sitting in his automobile on the brink of the Grand Canyon in Arizona. The response came from Australia. Again nothing extraordinary, except—Zolin was watching the sun go down on Saturday afternoon; the Australian, due to the difference in time, was called away from the conversation to have Sunday dinner.

There are some 700 licensed radio amateurs in Milwaukee county, ranging through the scale in age and occupation from bankers, doctors and priests to the YS (hamese for "young sprouts") who are still looking forward to high school and their first whisker.

About 250 of these "hams" belong to the Milwaukee Radio Amateurs' club, the oldest active radio club in the world. It was organized in 1917, three years before regular radio broadcasting was even started.

The club meets on Thursday nights in a room at the public museum and devotes a portion of its time to the teaching of telegraph code, in which all "hams" must be reasonably adept. The club is also the prideful owner of a mobile radio station, a light truck filled with $5,000 of radio equipment and capable of transmitting around the world.

The $5,000 figure is not unique among "ham" radio stations, but is far higher than the average investment. The amateurs estimate this at around $500, not counting the "ham's" labor of love in setting up his equipment. Most receivers are now bought ready made, but the average "ham" puts his own transmitters together, acquiring in the process a considerable knowledge of the principles of radio and a deep disdain for the ordinary BCL (that's "broadcast listener") who merely pushes a button to get Jack Benny and thinks a condenser is something cows sit on to give milk.

Under international agreement, seven wave bands have been allotted to the amateurs. Over these goes the chatter, serious and trivial, of 115,000 "hams" scattered throughout the world.

Not all of these, however, can engage in the casual chit-chat. Some countries, notably those behind the iron countain, look with disfavor upon the flow of "ham" talk. These nations transmit their attitude to the state department, and American "hams" are thereupon forbidden to talk to amateurs there, upon penalty of losing license. There are now about 15 nations on the forbidden list.

Bill, the young son of a staff member at the Sun Valley (Idaho) resort, eyes a fir that he'd like to chop down and bring home for Christmas. He thinks he can hew it with his trusty ax, but how's he going to carry it away? Cute, isn't he?

Be Ready to Talk

Notwithstanding this suspicious attitude by a portion of the world, ordinary conversation among "hams" more closely resembles that of two women with new hats than it does a meeting of Espionage, Anonymous. The usual dialog after a casual "CQ" revolves around two topics of universal interest: The personal lives of the talkers and new developments in their hobby.

"If you answer a 'CQ,' you'd better be ready for about 45 minutes of chatter," one "ham" said. "Otherwise it's a bust."

Distance means little to the "ham," for his set can span half the earth with as little power as it takes to light an ordinary electric bulb. The expert, however, must know when and on what wave length to hunt for this distance, for the shifting of the heaviside layer, off which radio waves bounce in the stratosphere, makes the best time and wave length change from day to day. Fortunately, however, for the families of the "hams," conditions on the amateur wave lengths make daytime reception the best here, in contrast to the regular broadcasting bands, on which nighttime reception is superior.

Many of the "ham" contacts are as fleeting as the appearance of a single breath on frosty air; a station, once contacted, may never be reached again. A few blossom into deep and lasting friendship. Fred H. Zolin, 2443 N. Cramer st., president of the Milwaukee Radio Amateurs' club, made the acquaintance of Howard Yuen, of San Francisco, Calif., over the amateur waves. He later visited him and the families have been friends for 10 years. The younger Yuens refer to the Zolins as "their grandfather and grandmother in Milwaukee."

Regular Kaffeeklatsch

Some "hams" establish regular contact with some other particular hobbyist and spend most of their time talking to him. Indeed, in some cases, whole groups show up so regularly at the same time and wave length that they almost establish a right to it, just as some anglers achieve almost a title to a fishing hole.

The casual "CQ", though, is a lure flung into the unknown. It may come up with some strange fish—a clerk in a Newfoundland mining town, a resort proprietor in Florida, the keeper of a lighthouse off the English coast, an American engineer in the hills of Venezuela, a man living three blocks from the "ham's" home, whom the "ham" never suspected of being a kindred spirit.

Emil R. Felber, jr., 1625-A N. 18th st., spent a half hour in delightful conversation with an amateur in Austria. On a later check, he discovered he had been talking with the Archduke Anton, a fervent "ham." Many celebrities share the archduke's enthusiasm for the amateur waves, finding in them the anonymity and the common touch denied them in regular life. A number of priests and ministers are "hams," too, for similar reasons.

Let's Talk Weather

"Hams" in Florida and southern California have a great habit of dwelling upon their weather, dangling descriptions of palm trees, oranges and swimming before their Wisconsin fellows. To these, Fred E. Ebel, 3707 N. 58th blvd., has a stock answer. "Thanks for the weather report, old man," he says briskly. "It's an invigorating 25 here, about three inches of snow on the ground, just right for sledding. The ice rinks are covered with kids having a whale of a time. Nothing like breathing the crisp winter air and hearing the crunch of snow underfoot."

From then on, the conversation turns to condensers, coils and resistors.

This flow of "ham" talk reaches a crescendo on two week ends a year, when the American Radio Relay league, a national organization, holds its annual sweepstakes, awarding certificates to the member in each of the 10 United States radio districts who has talked to the most other "hams" within the prescribed time. The league also issues a "WAS" certificate to any "ham" who can prove he has "worked" with an amateur station in every state.

To establish the validity of their

Contentment's Better Than Riches, They Sc

Douglas Pavek is shown at the controls of his "ham" radio station while his wife looks on with approval. There are 700 "hams" in Milwaukee, many of them married, and most of the wives are also enthusiasts who get kicks out of chats with folks all over the world. The "hams" boast about wives who are kindred spirits, and make light of the news when a "ham's" wife sues, practically charging the hobby with alienation of affections. This happened recently, but not in Milwaukee. The wife won a divorce, but the husband won custody of the station and a right to live in it.

—Journal Staff

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'Hams'

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dispensable to an amateur as striped pants are to a diplomat.

These are about postcard size and contain the call letters of the amateur station, its location and space on which the amateur can record whom he talked with, when and some details of the conversation. They are exchanged, upon request, whenever a new station is contacted.

These cards are held proof absolute that the station actually has been reached. Some amateurs line the walls of their radio "shacks" with QSL's they have received. Many design their own cards, vying for individuality, beauty or whimsy in the design.

In the resort and the remote regions, the planning of the cards is taken with extreme seriousness. In Durban, South Africa, the Chamber of Commerce has taken over designing the back of the QSL's, filling them with information and statistics on Durban and its allurements. There is no record, however, of radio amateurs flocking there.